

**Governor's Rural Affairs Council  
Meeting Minutes June 17, 2021**

**1. Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton called the meeting to order at 10:07 am.**

**2. Roll Call**

**Member Agencies Present:**

Illinois Department of Aging, Amy Lulich  
Illinois Department of Agriculture, Robert Baren (phone)  
Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Wendy Bell  
Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Christine Davis (phone)  
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Chris Merrett and Sandy Wittig  
University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, Anne Silvis  
Southern Illinois University, Laura Kessel

**Not Present:**

Illinois Housing Development Authority, Illinois Department of Human Services, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Illinois Department of Public Health, Illinois Department of Employment Security, Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Community College Board, Illinois Department of Transportation, Illinois Farm Bureau, Illinois Finance Authority, Rural Partners

**Citizen Members Present:**

Heather Hampton-Knodle  
Sameer Vohra  
Sonja Reece  
Norm Walzer  
David Ardrey

**Guests:**

Troy Horton  
Mary Reynolds  
Shelly Tweedy  
Sean Park  
Karen Jenkins

**Lt. Governor's Office Staff Members Present:**

Juliana Stratton, Lt. Governor  
Charles Watkins, Chief of Staff  
Akanksha Balekai  
Kevin Beck  
Kirsten Davis-Franklin  
Bobby Mannis, Policy Director for the Office of the Lt. Governor

**Quorum determined.**

Lt. Governor Stratton inquired if there were any corrections or additions to the agenda for today's meeting. Laura Kessel made a motion to accept the agenda. Sonja Reece seconded the motion. Motion passed.

**3. Approval of Meeting Minutes from March 18, 2021.**

Lt. Governor Stratton announced that a draft of the minutes from the March 2021 meeting had been provided to council members prior to today's meeting.

Amy Lulich made a motion to approve the minutes. The motion was seconded by Sonja Reece. Motion passed. Minutes were approved.

**4. Lt. Governor Stratton Remarks**

The Lt. Governor reminded everyone that to serve on this Council, you must comply with the statutory mandates requiring the completion of the annual ethics and harassment-discrimination-prevention trainings. The training packets were attached to the calendar invite for today's meeting. Please review the documents, sign, and forward back to Levi Bain for record keeping. If you have any questions regarding this training, please let Levi know.

The Lt. Governor also reminded everyone to keep his or her phones muted unless you are presenting or speaking. When you do speak, please state your name first for the minutes.

Lt. Governor Stratton introduced the newest council member, David Ardery. She asked David to introduce himself to the members.

David stated he is the Executive Director of the Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools (AIRSS). He is excited to be a voice for education on this Council.

The Lt. Governor announced with the warmer weather and with the state opening back up, she will be taking advantage of visiting parts of the state again. She mentioned that in the past few months, her staff and her have begun to tour farms, small businesses, and education centers across rural communities of our state. One of her goals is to deeply understand all aspects of the agriculture supply chain.

As she travels the state, she values any opportunity to connect with members of the Council. She requested that if you would like to find a time to connect, please contact Nicholas Davis, Community Engagement Specialist, in her office.

Lt. Governor Stratton announced that her office has been working with the Illinois Farm Bureau and Illinois Grower's Association on "Cultivating our Communities" initiative, where her staff uplifts information about local farms across the state on social media.

She announced that Illinois will host the annual 2021 Farm Progress Show in Decatur. Illinois is collaborating with Lt. Governor Crouch of Indiana, and Lt. Governor Gregg of Iowa to put a focus on the Farm Progress Show. She also announced the Illinois State Fair will return from August 12-22 in Springfield. The DuQuoin Fair will be held from August 27- September 6.

Lt. Governor Stratton thanked everyone for their time, energy, and efforts for working on the GRAC.

## **New Business**

The Lt. Governor announced that Sean Park, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, who leads the Rural Grocery Store initiative will present today. She asked that Chris Merrett, Director of the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs introduce Sean.

Chris Merrett introduced Sean Park. He provided a brief background of the IIRA's work in rural food cooperatives. He noted that Sean previously owned and managed a grocery store in Rushville for 10 years.

Sean Park presented on the "Buy Fresh, Buy Local: Rural Fresh Markets" initiative. Sean explained the challenges currently facing rural grocery stores. He explained that a decrease in population and income with an increase in driving distances (which causes higher shipping rates) and competition from large chains stores has drastically affected rural grocery stores. He noted that when stores close, new owners are hard to find.

Sean mentioned that the loss of a grocery store affects the community in three ways as a loss for the community: 1) Sales tax revenue, 2) Access to healthy foods, 3) A place to visit or gather. He is working to find new and creative ways to bring back a type of the "old grocery store" with a new way of doing business. His job is to provide counseling services through the entire process of the new store.

Sean noted that his team is starting to work with urban areas in addition to rural areas. He mentioned that many of the same issues are present: lack of capital, loss of the "third space" for people to gather outside of work or home, and loss of fresh food. His team is also thinking of ways to combine the grocery store with a telehealth office.

Sean mentioned that Norm Walzer's new book, *Community Owned Businesses*, would be published this summer. This book has examples of consumer cooperatives.

The Lt. Governor thanked Sean for his presentation and asked if there were any questions.

Heather Hampton-Knodle wanted to know who this type of community-owned business could get past the micromanaging of community owners. Sean explained that he likes to think of the business as a school. The school hires a superintendent to work daily to work with parents, teachers, etc. Issues that arise that the superintendent cannot handle are brought

to the board. He explained a cooperative works the same way. The manager is the superintendent and the cooperative also has a board for larger issues.

Shelly Tweedy highlighted the Great Scott Market. She stated this market has been a source of revitalization for the area.

Karen Jenkins wanted to know if Sean had thought of proposing telemedicine, education, and farm plots to assist with growing produce locally. Sean explained that yes, growing produce locally is an excellent model to help distribution and costs.

The Lt. Governor stated that bridging the urban/rural divide is an important issue. She felt that when Sean explained some of the challenges, some of these issues (e.g. living in a food swamp) were also the result of lack of education. Even if the store has fresh produce will lack of food education keep people from purchasing produce or other healthy foods. She also noted that lack of the third space – a venue for casual visiting, gathering, etc., is also very important.

### **Committee Updates**

Lt. Governor Stratton asked that updates be provided on efforts to develop telehealth, rural education, and economic infrastructures throughout the state.

### **Healthcare**

Laura Kessel, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine.

Laura provided an update that her committee has been meeting to pilot a project for two public spaces for telehealth appointments. One location will be the Farm Bureau in Lewistown. The second site has not been identified. SIU psychiatry will be the first to start. If successful, they will look at expanding.

### **Education and Workforce Development**

The Lt. Governor requested that Bobby Mannis provide an update on education and workforce. Bobby announced there is a legislative retreat focusing on rural schools and students. There will also be a teacher workforce discussion. The Lt. Governor thanked Bobby for the updates.

### **Economic Development & Infrastructure**

The Lt. Governor stated that Norman Walzer would provide an update.

Norm announced that post conference follow-up seminars are continuing. These include Virtual Funding which would include proposals from communities who have projects but need funding. He is wondering if more than one group would be able to assist with funding.

Norm announced another book on rural areas and transitions. This will look at rural communities' potential if they would have technical upgrades. The book will focus on opportunities for communities. Heather has been working to find funding to help with business transitions.

The Lt. Governor thanked Norm for his report.

## **5. Member Updates and Reports**

Chris announced that Midwest Community Development Institute would be held August 9-12 in person in Moline, IL. For more info, please visit: [www.midwestcdi.org](http://www.midwestcdi.org).

Heather Hampton-Knodle asked that anyone having suggestions related to funding for broadband to please contact her.

Sameer Vohra from the SIU School of Medicine announced the Rural Health Summit webinars.

Rob Baren stated his organization is working on a grant to expand mental health programs for farmers.

Christine Davis stated her organization is working on updated the IL State Water Plan.

Mary Reynolds announced that Tech Prairie STEAM Expo is under development for the State Fair during August 18-22 in the Orr Building.

Amy Lulich mentioned that Senior Day at the State Fair is August 16.

Anne Silvis mentioned that Rural Partners and Illinois Extension presenters delivered a presentation on TIF fundamentals for small business development participants. A recording can be seen at <https://youtu.be/hX1ZwsK910E>.

The Lt. Governor asked if there were any public comments. There were no public comments at this time.

Lt. Governor Stratton announced the next meeting will be September 16. She mentioned that Akanksha will be leaving her office. She expressed her thanks for the outstanding job that she has done during her time in the Lt. Governor's Office.

Laura Kessel made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Sonja Reece second the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 11:28.

### **Respectfully Submitted:**

Sandy Wittig and Chris Merrett  
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs  
Western Illinois University